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Published in:
Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management

DOI:
10.1016/j.pursup.2007.09.005

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management 13 (2007) 196–198
JOURNAL OF PURCHASING AND SUPPLY MANAGEMENT
www.elsevier.com/locate/pursup

Notes and Debates

With a little help from your friends (and neighbors): A potentially faster way to accumulate knowledge in the field of purchasing and supply

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Received 12 August 2007; received in revised form 12 September 2007; accepted 12 September 2007

Introduction

Purchasing and supply management is a relatively young twig on the tree of management science. There are excellent empirical studies that explore key issues in this sub-discipline, that are well designed and executed, and have far-reaching conclusions for the research community and/or practitioners. One excellent study that springs to mind is that of Paul Joskow, first published in 1987 in the American Economic Review and reprinted in 1996 in Scott Masten's book "Case Studies in Contracting and Organization". Joskow's study empirically tests the importance of relationship-specific investments in determining the duration of coal supply contracts. The important question at stake in this study is about the governance of relations between buyers and suppliers. Moreover, the study is based on a well-defined general theory from which the core hypothesis is derived; the 'case' (purchase and supply of coal) is well argued, and a sample of coal contracts provides an excellent opportunity for testing the core hypothesis. This is a study in which qualitative and quantitative methods come together. Masten's book offers yet more interesting examples of such hybrid studies, such as Thomas Palay's study on the governance of rail freight contracting (Palay, 1984/1996), and Victor Goldberg and John Erickson's case study of long-term petroleum coke contracts (Goldberg and Erickson, 1987/1996). In the introduction to their contribution to this JPSM special issue on research methods, for one reason or the other Anna Dubois and Luis Araujo state that they do not wish to conclude with a plea for such hybrid or mixed studies. I was amazed by that point of view. In my opinion such studies offer an excellent opportunity for accelerated growth of knowledge in purchasing and supply management research, and we should emphasize that as often as we can.

Whatever path we take, it would be rather useless to reflect on qualitative versus quantitative methods without due regard for the broader context and the history of empirical research in this specific domain and without keeping the influence of the choices we make on the growth of knowledge at the back of our mind. My rather neutral point to start with is that whatever the research method is, there are always outstanding studies, but also studies of minor quality. Moreover, I take it for a fact that until now there have been a substantial number of qualitative studies in the field of purchasing and supply management research (Das and Handfield, 1997; Morlacchi et al., 2002), and that only recently a slight increase in quantitative empirical research has been signaled. In my modest opinion, many of the qualitative studies are not of especially high quality, as they lack rigor and theoretical inspiration (or aspiration) and tend to consider cases that are not particularly well founded. They do provide elaborate details about particular cases in purchasing and supply, but while their descriptive and/or explorative nature may make them interesting to a small and rather specific public of practitioners and consultants, or even useful as some kind of *teaching tool*, many of them provide little in the way of new, challenging or sweeping knowledge for the research community in the field at large.

Dubois and Araujo suggest that the case study is particularly well suited for constructing, adapting, extending, refining and testing theories. If so, two questions spring to mind: first, how is it that we do not see much of that promise substantiated in the field of P&SM until now, and second, are not quantitative (and/or hybrid) methods

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1478-4092/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.pursup.2007.09.005

equally capable for such purposes? My suggestion is that they are, and that we should try to learn from and cooperate with researchers in disciplines that have successfully shown the power of such approaches.

Learning from the field of sociology

These comments might raise the hackles of many. What grounds does the writer have for such a critical view? Let me try to explain that. Until about 15 years ago, I was a complete outsider in the field of purchasing and supply. Together with a group of researchers from various disciplines (sociology, economics, contract law, social and experimental psychology, and mathematics) we started doing empirical research in this particular field. On entering this domain, I soon noticed a striking resemblance between the state-of-the-art in P&SM and my own field of sociology some decades earlier. Once a young and developing field itself, sociology at that time was grappling with comparable problems: how to accomplish the acceleration of the growth of knowledge. More specifically, sociologists struggled with how to switch from a world of 'concepts' and 'conceptual models' to one of more comprehensive theory construction, modeling, and empirical testing that fit the research problem. In those days, descriptive and explorative empirical research was prevalent in sociology, with a substantial part being case-based. No doubt some of these case studies were both familiar and appealing to new students in this discipline, but they were used mainly as a *teaching tool*, to illustrate interesting social problems and help the novices form a picture of what sociology was all about. We diligently consumed our 'classics' but as time went by the feeling grew among sociologists that there was no growth of substantive knowledge in their discipline. More enervating, in the 1960s and 1970s researchers were divided into two camps in a 'battle of the methods': it was trench warfare, with many digging-in. In retrospect, it seems to me that these tedious meta-discussions ultimately led to greater intransigence, and sadly not to less, but to *more* stagnation. For many, if not all, they turned out to be a waste of energy, preventing a substantial number of social researchers from doing what they were good at and liked most—empirical research.

Some 30 years ago, a group of sociologists in the Netherlands chose to break out of this deadlock by explicitly changing the emphasis in their scientific work: from mainly descriptive and explorative to more explanatory research. And probably even more importantly, instead of restricting their view to their own small world, they opened up to scientists from adjoining disciplines (mainly economics, political science, and psychology), importing theoretical buildings blocks from these traditional disciplines, and integrating them with existing theoretical knowledge in their own field of sociology. From economists they learned how to deal with (social) complexities and to see the inherent beauty of parsimonious theoretical models. This new approach had consequences for both their research designs and their analytical models. And of course there was a price to be paid— we had to accept that progress could not be made without self-restraint. We could not afford to go into every problem that crossed our path, which made it imperative to stick to the most pivotal questions and core issues in our discipline. What is more, we had to accept the necessity of some kind of division of labor with scientists from adjoining disciplines.

Lessons for P&SM research

Of course, it is up to others to judge whether this new 'explanatory' route in sociology has delivered on the promise. But perhaps there are readers who recognize in this tale some similarities to the issues and opportunities in their own field. Some might agree that their relatively young sub-discipline could benefit from at least a small increase in the number of quantitative studies. Quantitative research, if sound and focused on core issues in the field, and theory-driven or at least 'inspired' by theory, may provide a solid base for accelerating growth in knowledge. The paper by Ronald Batenburg is a strong example of one of the strengths of quantitative research—it gives us empirical facts to talk about. In my view it is much less strong in coming up with explanations though—the lack of the necessary control variables and of a proper theoretical mechanism makes the explanatory part problematic.

For sure, it is easier to make suggestions than to carry them out. Many researchers in the field of purchasing and supply may be quite familiar with qualitative methods, probably more so than with quantitative research methods. Traditionally, they may have ready access to certain organizations, since many of them are in frequent contact with practitioners in the field. They may be accustomed to combining their scientific role with a consulting or advisory role, giving them ample opportunity to do more in-depth analyses in a more qualitative setting, and providing them with a rich descriptive knowledge base. For these researchers, more quantitative methods may be less attractive (Melnyk and Handfield, 1998, p. 313). They might even find these methods too demanding in terms of financial and other resources, or too difficult to find research funding for. I do acknowledge potential objections of this nature.

However, help may be close at hand. These researchers might be surprised at what they could achieve by collaborating with researchers from neighboring disciplines, such as economists (e.g. for theory (re)construction), sociologists (to translate theory into appropriate research designs or to collect quantitative data on a large scale), psychologists (to unravel specific micro complexities), contract lawyers (to help analyze contracts and other types of written documents) and mathematicians (for formal modeling and newly developed techniques for complex data analysis). While these 'foreign' researchers

contribute new specific input, one's own human and social capital may present a solid base for synergies on future research projects.

I hope that my contribution to this special issue will be seen not only as a suggestion, but also as an invitation from (what used to be) a complete outsider. There are plenty of sociologists out there who have some experience in theory-driven research as well as knowledge about how to collect quantitative data. Researchers from other disciplines may join in as well; we just have to ask them. For sure, academics and practitioners in purchasing must recognize the implicit 'make-or-buy' decision here, and my suggestion is to buy.

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